

THE VOICE OF THE RAIN
– Walt Whitman

Theme

The Voice of the Rain is a poem that celebrates rain and its natural-cycle for the benefit of earth and the life it supports. The poem is in the form of a conversation between the poet and the 'rain'.

The whole narrative of the Rain is about how it leaves the ground, fulfills its duties in the atmosphere, and comes back to the ground out of love in order to beautify the world and spread life.

It says that it purifies earth and also gives life to it. It returns back to earth exactly like a song, which finally return to its singer in the form of appreciation after it is heard everywhere round the globe.

The last couple of lines in particular are about the idea-"Love draws people back to their roots."

Explanation

The poem begins with the poet asking for the identity of the soft-falling rain shower. Much to the surprise of the poet, the rain replies to his question. And, the poet translates this 'voice' of the rain for his readers.

The rain identifies itself as the 'Poem of Earth'. It says that it rises from the land and the deep sea, in the form of the intangible water vapours, and goes up to the immeasurable sky. It then takes the form of clouds with various shapes. Although it changes in its form and shape, its core existence remains the same.

It descends or falls on the surface of the earth to eliminate droughts, wash away the tiny particles and settle down the dust-layers. It reinvigorates the dry lands and gives life to the seeds that, otherwise, would have remained dormant and unborn. Thus, the rain drops rise in the form of vapours only to come back to its origin in the form of rain. During this cycle, it purifies and beautifies (by nourishing the unborn seeds) the planet.

The last two lines of the poem are the poet's reflection upon the answer given by the rain. The poet observes that the life of rain is similar to that of a song. A song originates from the heart of the poet, travels to reach others and after fulfilling its purpose (whether acknowledged or not), it returns to the poet with all due love. Similarly, the rain rises from the land and oceans, wanders, fulfills its purpose of nourishing life and purifying the planet, and then returns to its birth-place.

Connotations & Literary Devices:

Personification is used on rain to turn it into a being that talks. For instance, the poem states that the Rain gave the narrator an answer. The poem also states that the Rain rises and descends. The purpose of using personification is to narrate the story through the Rain and to see life from the Rain's point of view.

There is also a metaphor comparing rain to song, which could imply a person. The metaphor compares how the Rain leaves the ground to come back to the ground, giving back to it, much like a song or person leaves its home, only to come back after fulfilling its journey.

There are interesting connotations to how Whitman describes the Rain. He calls it a "soft-falling shower", implying the gentle and calm aspect of rain. And forever....., This line refers to the fact that both rain and poets 'give back' to all around them. It is the purpose of both nature and poets to purify and beautify the world- in a figurative and literal way. Without the nourishment of the rain and the words of a poet the world would not be as colorful a place.

Shifts:

There is a shift between lines 2 and 3, where the point of view changes from the poet to the Rain. The purpose of this shift is to show what the poet asks the Rain, and what the Rain subsequently answers him with.

IMPORTANT LINES:

‘Which strange to tell...’

Often, poets took on the role of the mediator between nature and humanity. The poet admits it was strange that he could understand the rain and now takes up the task of translating the answer for the readers.

‘I am the poem of the earth’

There is an immediate metaphoric comparison between the rain and poetry. However, this significance only comes to light in the poet’s reflection at the end of the poem.

‘Eternal I rise...’

The sense of permanence is extremely strong throughout the poem. The cyclic lifestyle is endless and shall continue as long as the connection between the rain and earth persists. The words ‘eternal’, ‘impalpable’, ‘bottomless’ show that though we record the overt reality, the true scope of nature remains tantalizingly beyond our rational comprehension.

‘Altogether changed, and yet the same’

The rain changes its appearance from intangible vapours to abstract clouds, yet, at its core, it remains the rain. This is the universal law that energy is never destroyed, only transferred from one form to another. Hence, ironically, in change, lies eternity.

‘I give back life to my own origin’

The rain falls to bring life to the unborn seeds hidden in the earth, its own birth-place.

‘(For song... duly with love returns)’

These lines have been placed in parenthesis because they are not a part of the conversation between the poet and the rain, rather its aftermath where the poet reflects on the conversation. He realizes that the rain’s life is similar to that of any song. A song’s birth place is the poet’s heart. Once complete, it is passed on (wanders) from one person to another. It may change (reck’d) or remain the same (unreck’d) as it travels, but one day, it returns to the poet with all due love of the listeners.

Style of the poem

Walt Whitman broke several conventions of poetry when writing this poem. There is no rhyme scheme nor do the lines stay of the same length. Although each phrase is just enough to be read in one breath, we find ourselves breathless as the line runs on and eventually becomes a part of the whole. This kind of poetry was known as prosaic poetry, that is, poetry that is written like prose.

Answer the following questions in 30-40 words.

1. How does the rain justify its claim 'I am the Poem of Earth'?
2. What does the rain do to the things day and night?
3. What answer did the rain give to the poet about its origin?
4. On what does the 'rain descend'? What does it do to the things on which it falls?
5. List the pair of opposites found in the poem.

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow:

1. And who art thou? Said I to the soft falling shower,

Which, strange to tell, gave me an answer, as here translated:

I am the poem of Earth, said the voice of the rain,

- a. Name the poem and the poet.
- b. Who does 'I' refer to in the first and the third line of this extract?
- c. What do you understand by the phrase 'Strange to tell'?
- d. How has the answer been conveyed to us and what is it?

*I descend to lave the droughts, atomies, dust- layers of
the globe,*

*And all that in them without me were seeds only, latent,
unborn;*

- a. With what purpose does the rain descend from the sky?
 - b. How does the rain help the seeds?
 - c. What is latent and unborn and why?
 - d. What does the phrase 'lave the droughts' mean?
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